

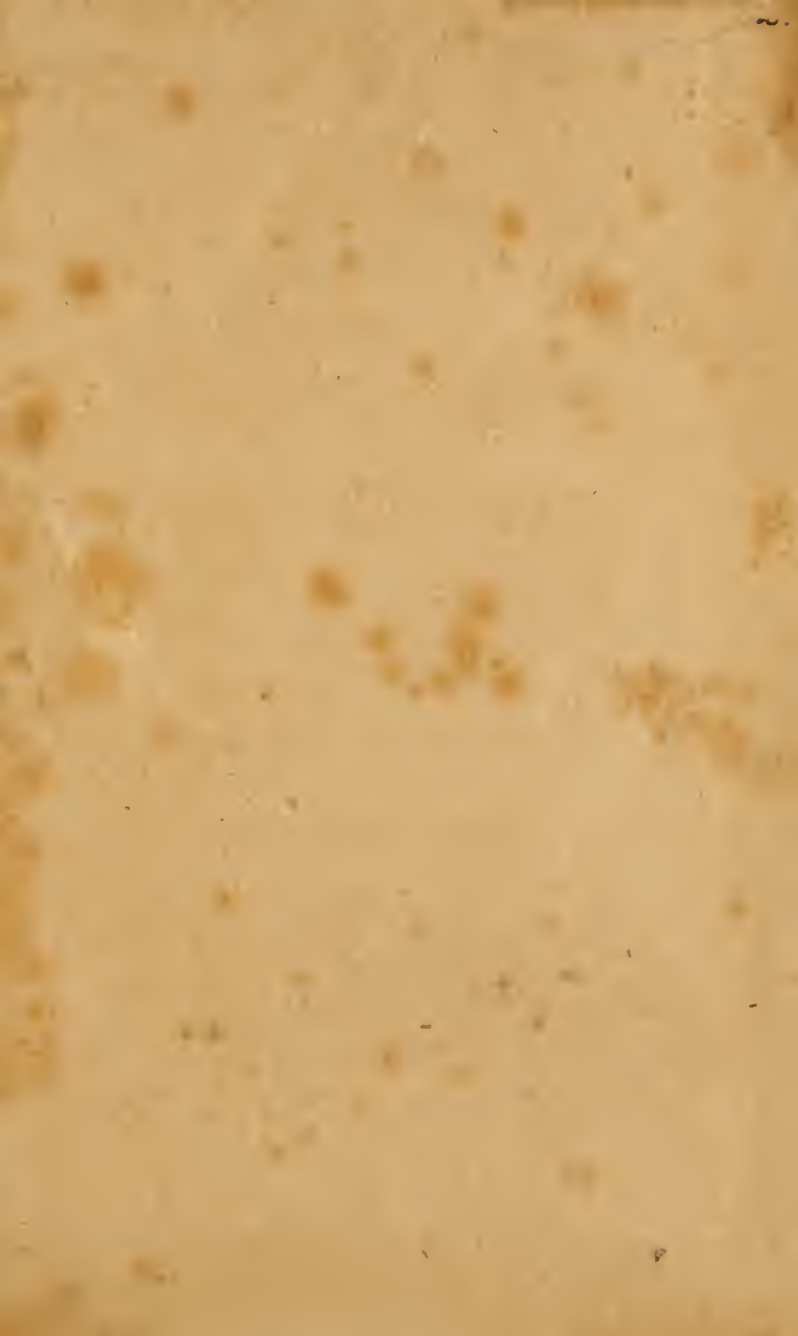


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THE
CHRISTIAN ALMONER ;

A

Sermon

PREACHED IN BEHALF OF A


BENEVOLENT SOCIETY.

BY


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A SERMON.

HEBREWS XIII. 16.

BUT TO DO GOOD AND TO COMMUNICATE FORGET NOT ; FOR WITH SUCH
SACRIFICES GOD IS WELL PLEASED.

THE great object of Christianity was to relieve the world of its miseries—to bind up the wounds of the broken-hearted—to dissipate the doubts and the fears of unevangelized nature—and to scatter light over the prospects of futurity. The design was worthy of its Almighty author. But that design was not to be accomplished by an extended and sudden exertion of Divine power. Such a mode would have displayed a *single* attribute of God, to the exclusion of all the rest ; instead of that varied and splendid exhibition which is presented by the scheme of redemption. It would have removed the agency and responsibility of man, by leaving every thing to the operation of miracle. On the contrary, our Saviour selected a mode of executing this plan of benevolence, which considered man a rational, as well as accountable creature. It commenced, with disclosing the errors of the understanding—the falsehood of prevalent maxims—the inconsistency of many of the common notions, with general and individual happiness. It revealed to man what he was, in terms which he could easily understand. It then removed all those practical maxims, which were derived from the light of nature, and were good in themselves, to a permanent and durable foundation, which secured them

from the vicissitudes of popular opinion. And, lastly, it communicated all those truths which were necessary to create a harmony of thought and action, with the peace of the world.

Let any one, brethren, compare these remarks with the moral state of society, previous to the advent of Messiah. Let him observe by what feeble sanctions the best principles of duty were inculcated, and how often they conflicted with the views of the intelligent and learned. How often superstition frustrated what benevolence suggested! How often the most marked selfishness gave rise to the prevailing sentiments of the day! And, in a word, what confusion and disorder reigned in the whole circle of morals. And then let him say whether the scheme of Christianity was not imperiously demanded.

But there is one doctrine inculcated by the religion of Jesus Christ, which distinguishes it from every other—and which should enlarge our gratitude for the gift of the Gospel—we mean that of an universal benevolence. A doctrine so fixed in its character—so suited to our wants—that it carries with it the most complete evidence of its Divine authority. It is this which affords a remedy for all those evils which the curse of sin has entailed upon our world. It is this which provides for those mischiefs which arise from our errors and frailties. This, which is adapted to protect us from all the sorrows of misguided feeling or passion, by teaching us to love even our enemies, and our neighbour as ourselves. It was indeed an act of perfect wisdom and goodness, which devised a doctrine so salutary, and contrived the means of rendering it practicable. We have not now time, brethren, to unfold to you all the particulars of this doctrine: to shew you, as we might, that it is fully exemplified in the

Deity himself, when he has characterized himself by the emphatic expression, "LOVE:" that it is the parent of every principle which renders the Christian a true philanthropist, and dignifies him with a heavenly nobility. We may not stop to shew you its different methods of action. We have this morning to confine ourselves to one: it is that which the Apostle has enjoined in our text—"to communicate forget not; for with such sacrifices God is well pleased." If our object were exclusively to accomplish the purpose for which we have been requested to discuss this subject, we should adopt a very different method of addressing you: we should appeal to those generous feelings, which in many of you, have been unable to resist the supplication of wretchedness and want: we should endeavour to carry you from your homes of comfort, to the hovels of misery: we should exhibit to you the wan and hapless spectacle, which we are too apt to imagine exists only in fancy—and we do not flatter many of you, when we say, we should know how to strike a chord that would open the heart and the hand. But then we should accomplish a limited purpose. We should only set one passion in array against another. We should only create a momentary impulse. We aspire to a higher end. We wish to create a permanent conviction of duty: a principle which will continue to be active—and will tend to secure you many of those blessings which it is our prayerful desire may be the lot of each of you. Nay, we come up to vindicate the religion of our Master, from those aspersions which its enemies, in the shape of selfishness, illiberality, or avarice, have wantonly cast upon it. We intend to let that religion speak for itself, in the sentiments or language of its author. We bespeak your serious attention.

The nature of a Christian charity, in the sense in which we have now adopted the term, is not only frequently misunderstood—but, the motives to it, are too lightly estimated—the objections against it are groundless excuses—and the refusal to practice it, must necessarily lead to the most dangerous consequences. We shall use our feeble endeavours to establish each of these positions, in their order.

It is perfectly true, that the foundation of our principle is admitted by general consent : and yet the ideas which are entertained by many, are such as render it difficult to reduce it to practice. We praise the liberal man ; but we are too often satisfied to rest the subject there : as if the meed of our praise were an apology for duty ; or the admiration of a virtue were received as a substitute for the virtue itself. The secret of this practical error may be found in two sources : The first is—the impression that *our duty consists in negatives—wholly in avoiding sin*. The man of even confined observation, will have seen how correct this remark is, singular as it may seem at first. The consequence is, that as, wherever bounty is bestowed, it is always arbitrary, men are as well satisfied with themselves when they have given a trifling pittance, as if they had been generous. It is too true, that we often estimate the amiableness of characters by their doing no wrong, rather than by their doing good. Those crimes of which a civil court takes cognizance are, for the most part, positive acts. But, brethren, we shall be judged before a tribunal, whose laws are graduated on a higher scale. I open the pages of those laws ; I read one of them to you : “ *To him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin.*” When the judge has finished the scrutiny of my catalogue of other crimes—the question is changed : it is no longer—“ what vice hast thou for-

borne? but—what virtue hast thou practised? thou art not an idolater—but, hast thou loved as well as revered the true God?” “Thou hast not robbed thy neighbour—but, hast thou done him good?” That Judge has strikingly exemplified these remarks:—The unprofitable servant was cast into outer darkness—not for squandering—not for losing his talent—but for hiding it in a napkin—for neglecting to improve it. The fig-tree was cut down and cast into the fire, not for producing bad fruit, but because it was barren of fruit. And lest the figurative dress should obscure these solemn truths, the Judge more simply describes the process of that awful day, and details the terrible sentence upon those who neglect the duties of humanity. “*I was an hungred, and ye gave me no meat; I was thirsty and ye gave me no drink—naked, and ye clothed me not—sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not.*”—“*Forasmuch as ye did it not to the least of these, my brethren, ye did it not to me.*” Then follows the doom—“*These shall go away into everlasting punishment.*” In the 12th chapter of Luke our Saviour endeavours to enforce the same truth. We are solicitous, brethren, to impress these things deeply. But if the language so solemnly uttered by Jesus Christ cannot do it, all other efforts would fail.

The second source of the practical error in question, is, *a false impression of the nature of the opposite vice.* We hear of avarice. The very name disgusts us. Fancy gathers around it all that is abject and degrading. A sentiment of contempt arises in the bosom. What are we doing? Let us not run away with a feeling of self-complacency, until we have examined ourselves. Here is a man who is generous to the wants of his family. His coffers are open to feed all their desires. He is not avaricious. No; we may not call him by

that opprobrious epithet. But we want some other term. He lives entirely for his own. He is laying up treasures in this world ; and he enjoys them himself. But he is not liberal to his God. Dear brethren, why do we content ourselves with seeking for shades of guilt to appease our consciences ? Institute no comparison between this man and the miser. But follow the Saviour again ; and remember that the principle of illustration is not concerned by the extent of wealth. Jesus Christ has presented this very character to you : and he has not disfigured him with a single additional vice. And yet “ *in hell he lifted up his eyes.*” The horrors of Tophet, which Messiah but this once so largely developed, are disclosed to shew you, how a worldly selfishness, pleads for a single pitying drop, to slake the thirst of its suffering ! Let us return to other reasoning. My brethren, you need no such exemplification.

We will present to you, *secondly*, the *motives for liberally communicating*. We will take the first of these from *our relative situation in society*. We are dependent on one another. By the very constitution of society it must be so. And hence a feeling and active benevolence is so necessary. Who is to send the Gospel abroad ? Who is to pay for its support ? Who is to build up churches where the privileges of Christianity are but little known ? Who is to take care of the poor ? There is but one answer ; the burden must fall on the remainder of society, who know something of the value of religion, and the worth of the soul ; and who are favoured with the comforts of life ; their very difference of circumstances imposes a debt, which a life of active liberality alone can liquidate. If this be not so, then there is no law for the relief of spiritual and bodily misery. We shall show you, pre-

sently, that God has not been so improvident—that he has left explicit directions. But who are this remainder, on whom such a burden rests? It is you, my brother—and you—and you—and I; it is individuals, who compose the mass of this character—and each of whom is required to act in his individual character. So far as any one refuses, that far he rebels against the very law of nature. Now set aside, for a moment, every revealed precept of Heaven. What principle could be more detrimental to public good than that which obliges us to act only where our own private interest is concerned? What would become of society? Illustrate the inquiry by an example: “Suppose the statesman relinquished the helm, whenever he had arrived at the summit of his personal wishes; the ruler could be bought by the pledge of personal aggrandizement; the pastor were to seek his own personal salvation only.” We are proceeding from one absurdity to another. We are unhinging society. We are transforming its members into voracious brutes, to prey upon one another. You consider these consequences extremes. They are so. And yet if this principle of selfishness have any legitimate tendency, it is that of violating every part of the social compact. If we are to do good only to ourselves, where will you arrest the evil consequences? We wish to shew you that such a rule of action outrages nature in its order and morality, so far as it acts. What think you then of the disposition? We ask one other question: Is there not a tacit obligation, by natural law, “that when any of us are suffering, we should not be left to perish, but that each should furnish such relief as he himself would expect in such a case?” Brethren, apply these hints to the cases of those who are suffering in soul or body.

We could present a second motive in the pleasure

which is derived from giving. In the consciousness of fulfilling our duty. In the idea that we are not living in vain. In that luxury of feeling which arises from a variety of causes in the bosom of the cheerful giver, as a blessing from God. A pleasure, which moralists never have defined ; and which they never can define : which grows with the habit ; enlarges the heart ; ennobles other sentiments ; and even creates other virtues. But this were superfluous. Some of you, we are confident, are able to say, that if you envy the rich man his wealth, it is because you covet such a rich repast of feeling on which he is enabled so largely to feed.

But let us set aside every thing else. We are speaking to believers in the word of God. We are to vindicate it from aspersion. We are to shew you that it is not so narrow and contracted in its views, as selfishness has slanderingly represented. We will call it to speak for itself. When miserly reluctance charges wretchedness to indolence, mismanagement, or some other cause which is intended to apologize for refusing—the answer of this oracle is, “*the destitute shall never cease out of the land ;*” in other words, their existence is a part of the dispensation of God. The poor and the unenlightened are left as Christ’s receivers, to collect the tribute for him. In their persons, he asks you to give for himself. He has told us so. Hear this word further : “*The righteous sheweth mercy, and giveth.*” “*The good man hath dispersed, he hath given to the poor.*” “*Blessed is he that considereth the poor, the Lord will deliver him.*” “*Honour the Lord with thy substance.*” “*The liberal soul shall be made fat.*” “*He that hath pity upon the poor lendeth unto the Lord ; and that which he hath given will he pay him again.*” “*He that hath a bountiful eye shall be bless-*

Testament abounds with them; and with promises of blessings to the liberal. Suffer one more from Ecclesiastes, for the sake of its beauty. "*Cast thy bread upon the waters; for thou shalt find it after many days.*" The Egyptians sowed their grain during the overflowing of the river Nile, on its surface. The grain sunk. It was buried in the mire. The waters retreated. The seed sprung up in a plentiful harvest. So let him that giveth of his property to God, remember, that though it seems sunk from his sight, he has the pledge and the promise, of a harvest of blessings. What a gain! "What a holy usury!" Ah! divide with God, dear brethren, and he will be interested in your success.

Does any one imagine that all this refers to the trifling pittances of a gift? Examine the charities which God prescribed to the Jews. You will find them in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. You will there see that this people were obliged to leave their corn on their land's ends, for the use of the poor. They had to devote a considerable part of their produce to the priests: And no less than one tenth to maintain the Levites. The produce of the earth, every seventh year, belonged to the poor, as much as it did to the regular owner. Observe likewise the following regulation. "*When ye reap the harvest of thy land, thou shalt not wholly reap the corners of thy field, neither shalt thou gather the gleanings of thy harvest: And thou shalt not glean thy vineyard,*" "*thou shalt leave them for the poor and the stranger.*" Now, when you add the other taxes, for the religious establishment, and for other, and similar purposes, some may be half inclined to deem this an intolerable burden. Not at all. They gave most cheerfully. They esteemed these regulations a mark of Divine wisdom. We do not state them as binding on us: we do so, to shew

you how liberal God required his own people to be : We do so to ask, whether, although our religion is the best in the world, its excellency is not better seen in this respect in the Gospel, than in the conduct of its professors. We do so, to contrast the ancient Hebrews, in their principles and habits, with that narrow-souled policy which feelingly calculates its cents and dollars, as it reluctantly drops them into the coffers of God : that god-dishonouring policy which fears lest it give too much, and counts what it has given, lost.

Most strange indeed is it that with so many Scripture directions—so many Scripture examples—the Christian should think himself at liberty to give just what he pleases—and as sparingly as his humour dictates : Should think himself at liberty to cut asunder the binding influence of one of the most imperative precepts of the Gospel ; and thus to come within the scope of that solemn affirmation of the law, “ *He that offendeth in one point is guilty of all.*”

And now, brethren, would you be, in this particular, what the people of God in every age have been ? Then we have a resistless appeal to your hearts. Read the character of Job—“ *A father to the poor ; and the cause which he knew not, he searched out.*” Would you be a Zaccheus ? “ *Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor.*” Would you be a Dorcas ? See in this book, what an imperishable monument is erected to her name. A Cornelius ? His alms came up as a memorial before God. A Paul ? Read his life : what disinterestedness was there ! Would you have the religion of the primitive Christians ? What unbounded liberality is ascribed to them, even by the Heathens themselves ! How much did they expend to promote the Gospel ! How much to relieve the indigent and suffering ! You hear their bitterest enemy, in the rev-

son of an emperor, exclaiming to the Pagans, that “if they did not hasten to imitate this virtue of Christianity, its wonderful influence would win over the hearts of the Heathen world, and ruin the worship of the gods.”

Would you imitate the blessed Redeemer? “*He was rich, and yet for our sakes he became poor.*” Ah, senseless heart, that can resist the application, that gratitude demands!—“*for our sakes.*”—— Would you resemble our Father in Heaven? Behold! his every action to the world is charity—charity, “extensive as creation, constant as time, and endless as eternity:” with this glory he covers himself as a garment.

God has not demanded of us the sacrifices of the primitive disciples, in toil—and captivity—and ignominy—and persecution—and death. Thanks to his name, our “*lot is cast in pleasant places,*” and under prosperous circumstances: and can we then refuse that only worldly sacrifice which he demands of us, as he did of them—a liberal hand and a generous heart, to his church and his poor? No: I know we cannot. Dear brethren, I am ashamed to hint at the possibility of an ingratitude which would seem to invoke the reproaches of martyred saints. But I am anxious to see each of you—as an angel of mercy—habitually seeking to stanch the wounds of the bleeding heart—each of you a nourisher and extender of God’s own heritage—each of you—Oh most exalted honour!—an almoner of Jesus Christ, the King eternal!

It seems a sad compliment to human nature, after such motives as these, to stop to consider objections to charity: Yet suffer us briefly to allude to the three most common ones. The first is, that *we are often deceived in our distributions.* This objection applies only to the demands of the poor—it does not touch the duty of extending Christianity. Look at it. Assume

it as a truth. If it be a reason for refusing, then we make the innocent suffer for the crimes of the guilty. One who may be a proper object of charity, is denied, because others have not been so. Need we stay to shew you the consequences of this uncharitable reasoning? You have been deceived—and what then? is it from man we look for a reward? and shall we refuse to do God service, because man has deceived us? was not our motive right? and will not the Lord consider it still? shall a good intention fail of its end, in His sight, who searches the heart? What then have we lost? This is the Scripture mode of considering such an objection. We are as much opposed to an indiscriminate charity as any can be. But this is an evil which it is not worth while to combat. The danger lies in another direction. This evil is taken as an excuse, too often, for not giving at all; or for giving just the little that would save us from being singular—to use the mildest term we can. Brethren, the period of our present being is too short, and too responsible, to suffer us to wait so long as many do, to calculate the chances of deception in our charities. We should satisfy our consciences, whether this apology will answer our purpose, when we are called to give an account of our stewardship.

The second objection is, *we have not enough for ourselves*. And what is meant by this “*enough?*” Put it in competition with the commands of Jesus Christ. What is this “*enough,*” which stands thus in the way of an office of obedience and love? Are not a large portion of our expenditures on artificial wants? My brethren—if we have no other surplus than that which remains after the gratification of our plans, and passions, and caprices—then we have only to plan and cherish our passions, to be delivered from every obligation to

charity. We annul every scriptural commandment—we evade every preceptive injunction. How? by choosing to live entirely for ourselves. And what is the consequence if we do so? We have answered the question already.

The third objection is, that *the calls for charity are so numerous*. What are we saying? Are we making that an objection which ought to be a reason for contracting a habit of liberality? We are virtually declaring that our obligations to give are increased; and can this ever be an excuse for withholding? Brethren, suspect that charity which pretends to know exactly, and and in every particular, where to stop—we mean where the ability really exists—and which beyond a certain point, chosen for itself, is unfeeling and cruel. But it is useless to argue on such a point as this. The man who has the love of God in his heart, would draw an opposite inference. The man who designs the objection as a mere excuse for refusing, would not find his passions of selfishness altered by a conviction of his judgment. But we would like to refer the question to any liberal giver, whether he ever found himself a loser by the habit?

The last proposition which we advanced, in our introduction, was, that the refusal of charity, is attended with serious evil on the part of the refuser. Let us inquire how far this is correct.

In the first place, God has pledged his blessing to charity to his church and poor. Now this pledge of God is not believed, or else we should comply with the terms. What is this, but suspecting the Creator of falsehood? Or if this pledge is believed, then the blessing is undervalued: we do not think it worth the pains and sacrifice to acquire. This is insulting his

Again. This conduct is in direct violation of the commandments of God; and is therefore, not only indicative of a want of love to him, but it declares him a hard and unjust task-master; and assigns this as a reason why we throw off the yoke of his allegiance.

Again. You retain that which is not your own. And the robbery will be placed to a most solemn account in the day of reckoning. God, who will not suffer us to infringe on the rights of our fellows with impunity, hath told us, with a peculiar emphasis, that he is jealous of his own.

Further. As it regards the essence of the sin, this conduct is covetous in the sight of God. Now we read of "*the covetous whom the Lord abhorreth*;" but, although we hear of many other evils charged against the Christian, we cannot find a single instance of *covetousness* being imputed to him. On the contrary it is declared a vice of grossness, which good men hate, and which the Apostle Paul, in his epistle to the Corinthians, (1 v. 10, 11), has declared to be a just ground of excommunication from the church of Christ.

But, brethren, what think you of the conclusion of the mild and affectionate Apostle John?—"Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer;" but on whom does such an awful charge rest? the Apostle answers the question in the same connection—"Whoso hath this world's good and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him." The passage is too clear and too solemn, to need a comment or an inference.

Now reflect what a number of crimes are incurred by illiberality—by a contractedness in giving; and then add, that every single example tends to increase the number of criminals of this complicated character.

We must stop. We tremble at the statement the Scripture gives us, when we ask it to vindicate itself.

We are hastening, my dear brethren, to the place and the hour, on which we are to look back to the past scenes of our lives—on which we shall be asked for what have we lived? how have we “*come up to the help of the Lord?*” What have we done for his cause and his poor?—The place and the hour, in which the harvest of benevolence shall ripen: to which the illiberal and the worldling shall drag the long chain of blasted hopes, and see amid the wreck of the world, not a plank on which to throw the hand!—It is possible that ere then, some of these truths may have been forgotten—a love of mammon may have trodden them under foot—but then, they will demand a retribution fearful to the soul! The unchristianized, who were without the means of procuring the Gospel for themselves, will stand up as witnesses against some who enjoyed its privileges. Oh my God, what a spectacle! The destitute will arraign some who lived in comfort in the world! What a series of reflections are these! I am thankful that I am not yet hurried thither. And now, when a petition is presented to assist the cause of the Redeemer—to give the light of the Gospel to the perishing—or in any way to aid the suffering in soul or body—what if I reject it? or discourage it by the trifling gift, that undervalues the object, and causes others to do the same?—Oh we know your resolution, brethren; we see we have not plead the commands, and the mercies, and the love of the Redeemer, in vain! You will inscribe on this world’s goods—“*Holiness to the Lord.*” You will deem the opportunity precious. You will esteem it a mark of condescending goodness, that Jehovah stoops to be the receiver of your charities—

word for a munificent return ! You will consider not how much you now feel you could afford to give. You will suspect your feelings, of selfishness. You will consider the compassion and mercy of God, and your own obligations. You will consider that trying scene—where the beauties and enticements of the earth have perished—and all is lost, that you had, except the charities which you have laid up in the treasury of Christ—where the indigent widow is infinitely rewarded for her mites—and the disciple who gave the cup of cold water, because he had nothing more, receives of the waters of everlasting life !









